

Frederick Melo and Dave Orrick, *Pioneer Press*

Noah Gagner and Vic Rosenthal are next-door neighbors of different races, faiths and generations. Despite their differences, Rosenthal, 55, and Gagner, 25, showed up for a Martin Luther King Jr. Day rally at St. Paul's Central High School in similar frames of mind: to celebrate the mission and birthday of the nation's most famous civil rights leader.

"Dr. King's legacy about economic justice and racial justice should be something we do every day," said Rosenthal, who arrived representing Jewish Community Action, a St. Paul-based social action group.

"A lot of my opportunities are the result of Dr. King," said Gagner, who is studying to become a sports psychologist.

The twin themes of service and celebration resonated Monday throughout the Twin Cities as a cross-section of community leaders gathered to mark King's birthday. The slain civil rights leader was born Jan. 15, 1929, and felled by a gunman's bullets April 4, 1968, while standing on the balcony of his motel room in Memphis, Tenn., where he planned to lead a protest march for the city's striking garbage workers.

King was the 1964 winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and its youngest recipient. His birthday was first observed as a state and federal holiday in 1986.

More than 2,000 guests started their day at the Minneapolis Convention Center with the 21st annual MLK Breakfast.

The invitees spanned a who's who of politicians, including Gov. Mark Dayton, U.S. Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman.

The keynote speaker was Newark, N.J., Mayor Cory Booker, a darling of Democrats and city mayors around the country for his successes in narrowing the racial education achievement gap and reforming the city's police department.

"I was not there for the civil rights movement," Booker, 41, said at the outset. But he followed the disclaimer with a rousing speech that, drawing on the poetry of Langston Hughes and the words of King himself, carried a call for participation.

Booker said too many people - himself included at times - treat democracy "as a spectator sport," when action is needed.

"Do something," he said, repeating the words of a Newark neighborhood organizer he grew to respect over the years. "This generation of Americans is so caught up in what everyone else is saying or doing that we don't pay attention to what we are doing."

The legacy of King and the founders of the civil rights movement, he said, should not be their great oratory - so often repeated each year on his birthday - but what they accomplished.

"We celebrate his words, but it was his work we thank him for," Booker said.

The event's sponsors - the General Mills Foundation and the United Negro College Fund - also used the occasion to award three Minnesotans for service dedicated to social change.

Local Legend awards were presented to the Rev. Kevin McDonough of St. Peter Claver Church in St. Paul for his service in the Rondo community and Andy Wells, a Native American entrepreneur who founded Wells Academy outside Bemidji, Minn., which provides job-training skills.

Brandon Hill, a senior at Eden Prairie High School, was named an Emerging Legend. Hill co-founded The Brotherhood, a 60-member student organization that motivates students of color to perform better academically.

In St. Paul, students from across the metro marched from Central High School to Concordia University for a three-hour ceremony.

"I feel as if the world is not together or connected, so I want to come out here and listen to what people have to say and hopefully make the world better," said Helen Vo, a 14-year-old student at Roosevelt Middle School in Blaine.

At Concordia, Klobuchar, Franken, Coleman and U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., shared their reflections on King's legacy. Most remarked that the recent shootings in Arizona, which killed six bystanders and left Rep. Gabrielle Giffords with a near-fatal head wound, stood in stark contrast to King's lifework.

"King would have decried the acts of evil," Klobuchar said, adding later that for her, his legacy meant "being able to stand next to someone you don't always agree with for the betterment of this nation."

Coleman said the sudden calls for civility in public discourse shouldn't mean acquiescence. "We cannot be silent in the face of (racial and educational) disparities," he said.

McCollum offered the most emotional remarks of the morning. "This has been a difficult morning for me because I haven't allowed myself the opportunity to cry," she said, her voice trembling, "but I'm home now, and I need your help. ... A 9-year-old girl was killed meeting her member of Congress. Seniors were killed. ... I'm going to keep reaching out. ... I need you. I need you to do this job with me."

Keynote speaker Robin Hickman, president of SoulTouch Productions, a St. Paul-based filmmaking company, reminded the audience that King was labeled a radical, an agitator and an extremist so often, he came to embrace those labels. It was his work and the work of fellow "radicals" that desegregated public education and broke open all manner of color barriers.

She called upon young blacks to see themselves as "rescuers" - members of a community eager to hold each other aloft rather than demean each other through negativity. "We've got a modern-day underground railroad that we need to be up on, because we ain't free yet," Hickman said.

After attending the morning rally in St. Paul, school workers affiliated with Minnesota Reading Corps and AmeriCorps VISTA completed service projects in the Twin Cities. Rather than a day off, "we really consider it a 'day on,' " said Willy Tully, a program director overseeing 21 VISTA workers in Coleman's office.